

Clothing, Metaphor, and Memory in Nancy Youdelman's Sculpture

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From the first sight, the art of Nancy Youdelman fascinated me. It came as a surprise, although I was in Fresno in the spring of 2004, to interview women who had studied with Judy Chicago in the first Feminist Art Program at Cal State Fresno in 1970-71. Youdelman first studied with Chicago that year, then followed the program's move to CalArts, before going on for a master's degree at UCLA, where, like Chicago before her, she studied sculpture with Oliver Andrews. Entering Youdelman's studio, I was not only struck by her professionalism, but was immediately taken by both the originality and abundance of her work. Why wasn't she better known? This work deserved to find its audience I told myself and the artist.

Youdelman's sculpture emerged in complete harmony with the tenets of Chicago's program. But since her student days, Youdelman has not only been a feminist and an artist, she has also taken the time to be a wife and mother of two children, now grown. Her use of found materials such as old clothing, buttons, costume jewelry, and plant materials seems to hearken back to the installations done both in Fresno and the following year in Los Angeles in the fall of 1971, as a part of *Womanhouse*, on which she worked with Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and the students of the Feminist Art Program.

Youdelman ingeniously converts items of clothing into art, which evokes for me some of the performance pieces when the students at Fresno dressed up in elaborate costumes while role playing. Those character poses and the photographs that they made of each other at the time predated the related work of Cindy Sherman and others. Now, however, Youdelman transforms clothing without a body in it, usually turning something soft into something hard, at once adding ornament, and tangled meaning.

Youdelman's pieces have many layers of meaning. Perhaps originally affected by the reading group assigned as part of the Feminist Art Program, she is constantly looking to literature for inspiration: from Marcel Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past" to Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, where associations lurk "in every fold."



The issue of clothing as art has for sometime been an interest of mine. It's both feminist and multi-cultural. It immediately allows my college freshmen to understand what we mean by style in art. The irresistible forms Youdelman uses for her sculpture are at once suggestive of the people who might have worn them and of other worlds—of life and of death, as clothing is transformed into metaphor and memory. A delicate baby's dress now takes on not only the strength, but also the preciousness of the baby shoes that some proud parents have dipped in bronze. Youdelman has made visual magic out of the detritus that she has collected and made us think anew before we cast out our discarded clothing and the memories that it embodies.

Gail Levin is the author of *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (1995), *Hopper's Places*, and other books. Her biography of Judy Chicago is forthcoming.

Promise, 2003
14 x 15 x 12"
Mixed Media



Nancy Youdelman
Sculpture